

Women human rights defenders call for better protection and an enabling environment

(Geneva, 10 March 2015) Alongside the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva and the Commission on the Status of Women in New York, two simultaneous events focusing on women human rights defenders took place on 9 March. Commemorating International Women's Day, the panellists urged for better protection of women human rights defenders and encouraged governments to step up their efforts to ensure an enabling environment for WHRDs to conduct their legitimate work.

The event in Geneva was organised by the Permanent Mission of Norway, the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) with civil society partners ISHR, AWID and JASS – members of the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition.

Opening the event in Geneva, Ambassador Steffen Kongstad, Permanent Representative of Norway, recalled the resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2013 on the protection of women human rights defenders and urged for its implementation. He further emphasised that 'States have a responsibility to protect women defenders and those working on women's rights or gender issues from violations by State and non-State actors'.

Ahlem Belhadj, a Tunisian feminist activist, stressed that WHRDs face similar types of attacks from both State and non-State actors, where their morality, sexuality and privacy are challenged. 'In order to break these cycles, the struggle for the rights of human rights defenders must be concurrent with the struggle to eliminate violence against women and gender-based discrimination', she said.

Alejandra Burgos from the Salvadoran Network of WHRDs outlined the enhanced vulnerabilities faced by WHRDs pushing for better protection in environments where their work is criminalised, for instance in relation to sexual and reproductive rights. 'Governments need to do more to publicly recognise the work of WHRDs as human rights work through ad hoc declarations or awareness campaigns amongst local authorities. This legitimacy will go a long way in ensuring protection', said Ms Burgos.

Hina Jilani, prominent human rights lawyer from Pakistan and former Special Representative to the Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders, pointed to article 2 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and stated that more needed to be done at the national level to ensure an enabling environment, particularly in contexts where cultural norms and traditional values subvert the ability for WHRDs to conduct their work. 'Impunity for threats, attacks and intimidation of women human rights defenders must end and there must be zero tolerance for perpetrators' said Ms Jilani.

All three panellists highlighted the importance of strong and responsive networks which serve to extend solidarity, provide social support and play a role in ensuring protection of women human rights defenders at risk. More needed to be done to create, strengthen and support such networks, they said.

Michel Forst, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, drawing from the discussions from his recent regional consultations, stated that "We need to support women activists in their attempts to establish effective protection networks given the dearth of State-based resources for their protection". He further expressed his readiness to work with States and stakeholders to provide assistance in ensuring that national-level protection mechanisms are gender sensitive and responsive to the needs of WHRDs.

The OHCHR #reflect2protect campaign was also featured through the screening of a 'highlights video', which conveyed key messages about the need for everyone to stand up and be counted as women's human rights defenders. In it, the High Commissioner states that 'real change does not

happen unless women and men fight for these rights – and at the forefront of this fight are women human rights defenders’.

Jane Connors, OHCHR Director of Research and Right to Development Division, also highlighted that the United Nations, especially UN Country Teams, are key allies for women human rights defenders. The #reflect2protect campaign is one initiative of the United Nations aimed at raising awareness about the situation of women human rights defenders and legitimizing their crucial work. The importance of creating a UN-wide focal point to address reprisals was also recalled, as envisaged in Human Rights Council 24/24.

Background:

The UN General Assembly passed its first resolution on Women Human Rights Defenders in December 2013. The resolution 68/181 is a significant step forward in protecting Women Human Rights Defenders who face risks and attacks for their work to promote human rights.

The 28th session of the UN Human Rights Council, meeting from 2-27 March 2015 in Geneva, is the foremost body responsible for strengthening human rights promotion and protection throughout the world.

The Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) launched a campaign on 10 December 2014 called reflect2protect, focusing on the work of women human rights defenders and their specific protection needs.